Ryan Padraig Kelly

We’re seeing some big storms roll through south of the capital region, bringing hail and even a few isolated funnel clouds…

Rachel mutes the forecaster waving his arms at the churning mass of red, yellow and green spinning in their direction on the radar map.

She retrieves ice cubes from the freezer that hiss and spit with displeasure as they’re plunked into a glass of ginger ale.

She slides the patio door aside and hovers in the midst of combat

between the heavy humidity and the cool AC. She lifts a trembling hand to her brow, shielding her eyes against the hazy afternoon.

Crickets sizzle in the wheat field behind the fence. A dog barks two doors down. A bead of sweat slips down her spine like the condensation on her glass.

A growl grumbles in the distance, deep from the chest of the grotesque purple clouds gathering on the horizon.

She savours the stillness, embraces the calm.

When wind begins to tumble across the golden crops, Rachel wanders

back inside. She adds a double shot of Crown Royal to her drink. She sips it slowly as darkness slithers through the house.

She makes a second–less ale, more whisky.

A third–all whisky.

After tossing back a fourth, her tremors subside. She washes the glass thoroughly and places it neatly back in the cupboard.

In the gathering gloom, she vacuums.

She cleans out the fridge.

She sorts the recycling.

She makes the beds.

She showers.

She packs a bag.

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Earlier that morning, while Matt had snored through a boys-night hangover, Rachel’s ragged yoga pants had been painted with the abstract art of yogurt-covered fingers. Her socks were soaked through with apple juice. Her shoulder sported an angry throbbing crescent from the bite of a furious two-year-old-told-no.

Screams for more pepperoni harmonized with Blippi’s ballad about excavators.

“MO! MO! MO PEPP-O-ONI!”

‘Hey dirt see ya later…’

Demanded, discarded breakfast items were scattered across the counter. Sliced bananas drowned under soggy Rice Krispies in the wrong green bowl. A waffle dismembered into the typically preferred triangles laid cold and limp on a plate. The blood of devoured berries stained the tea towels hanging by the sink.

Rachel fetched another pepperoni stick and chopped it into bite-sized pieces.

The bowl she offered had been smacked away. “NO! BIG! BIIIIG!”

‘I’m an excavator…’

The dog, who had been dragging its butt on the carpet, pounced on the pepperoni before Rachel could scramble to pick the pieces up.

The microwave chirped, cheerily reminding her that a full cup of coffee sat abandoned in its bowels.

After handing over an intact pepperoni stick, she’d sunk down to the kitchen floor, back against the cupboards, hands pressed against her ears, eyes squeezed shut.

Not that long ago, she would have been unwinding from a long week at her job in urban planning that

sounded boring but that she’d loved.

She’d have been out for brunch with the girls, sipping bottomless mimosas in clean clothes, unbothered and uninterrupted.

She’d have been looking forward to a day of errands - maybe a yoga class, a root touch up, or a leisurely trip to the grocery story - before meeting Matt for a nice dinner and a bottle of red wine that might stretch late into the evening.

She wouldn’t be sitting here, on the grimy linoleum, her greasy hair piled in a haphazard bun, guilt sloshing in her gut for letting Millie

have screen time and pepperoni before 8 am.

Her personality wouldn't bear the scars of knife-like intrusive thoughts about Millie choking on a blueberry or suffocating in her bed or being crushed by a garbage truck or pulling a pot of boiling water off the stove onto her head.

She wouldn’t be prematurely aged, grey and slouched from the weight of worry over the threat of lurking cancer or bullies at school or kidnappers stalking the streets.

She loved her daughter; she hated being a mother.

When Matt had finally dragged himself out of bed, bloodshot eyes blinking against the sun blazing through the kitchen windows, Rachel was scooping dog puke out from between the couch cushions. The book she’d been trying to read for months was scrawled with brightly colored scribbles. Millie was crying over the chicken noodle soup that she’d been served for lunch; she’d wanted chicken nuggets instead.

Maybe Matt had felt static sparking on her skin when he pulled her forehead in for a kiss.

Maybe he’d seen bolts of fury flash in her eyes when he poured himself a cup of hot coffee.

Or maybe he’d picked up on nothing at all and was simply making an effort to be a nice husband when he offered to clear everyone out of the house and over to his mom's for the afternoon so Rachel could have a few hours’ reprieve.

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Rachel zips the duffle bag shut and carries it into the hall just as a sweeping tempest slams the walls. White sheets of rain lash against

the windows. A resounding boom rattles the bones of the house.

She’s taken aback by the audacity of her selfishness.

She’s horrified by the lengths she's gone to leave.

The bag, though packed light, is a lead weight. The straps cut into her palms in protest.

She steps into Millie’s room and sits on the edge of the bed. She smooths out the wrinkles on the unicorn-splattered pillowcase. The elephant-shaped lamp glares at her in accusation.

If she’s going to go, she should go now.

There’s a quiet, private, clean hotel room waiting for her in the city. She can order room service, sip cocktails, stay up late doom scrolling, and sleep for as long as her body demands.

She’ll send a short goodbye text to Matt, then ignore all of his panicked replies. Tomorrow she’ll really disappear. She’ll find somewhere to resuscitate her career, her life, herself.

As for Millie, Rachel’s feebly sure she’ll be better off without a mom who hates being a mom, without a

role model who never wanted the role to begin with.

Won’t she?

Rachel grabs Bunny from its pillowed perch to try to still the returning quiver in her hands. She hugs the faded pink plush to her face and lets her own crocodile tears soak into its floppy ears.

She could pull herself together. She could wipe her face, blow her nose, and steel her nerves. She could get up, grab the bag, and press onward.

Instead, she curls up in her baby’s bed until the storm passes.

When the rain gentles and the wind loses its voice, her phone pings with a heads up from Matt that they'll be home soon.

By the time they all topple in the door, a tornado of paws and boots and bags, the duffle is emptied and back in the closet, the hotel room is cancelled, and chicken nuggets are cooking in the oven.